

## Bringing digital solutions into ESS training

From Oudomxay province, in northern Laos, Mr. Keo Phongmany works for nonprofit association called Learning for Development Association (LDA). He is passionate about community development, particularly for people with disabilities. Keo chose to become an Employment Support Services (ESS) coach last year when he learned that the Vocational Training and Employment Support Services (VTESS) project of Swisscontact supports in creating job opportunities for people from disadvantaged groups.

Keo has a strong determination to support the target community and the needy — “I want to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds to find a job because they don’t get so many opportunities,” explains Keo about his main reason for becoming an ESS coach.



While local activities in Laos were not crippled greatly by COVID, the country still experiences the consequences of border closures that has affected not only Swisscontact staff, but also the travel of experts to Laos for project support.

COVID has challenged the VTESS project resulting in the modification of the training arrangement for ESS coaches which is normally conducted in Vientiane by expert trainers from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Luzern (HSLU), Switzerland, and Swisscontact Albania. A mixed mode training model has been introduced now where the VTESS project staff does lead the training and the expertise of the trainers from Switzerland and Albania is brought into the workshops through video links. This digitalization does not come without challenges; however, it is still effective and as an additional benefit has also boosted digital literacy of all ESS trainers and the coaches.

Keo’s challenge early on was to complete the recruitment of a gender balanced group of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as from various ethnic minorities, and how to overcome the language barrier between himself and beneficiaries from other ethnicities; now he must adapt to the pandemic situation as well. “I call the Provincial Coordinator from Oudomxay whenever I need advice on the recruitment and other things related to the project. He has supported me a lot since I became an ESS coach.”

Keo talks warmly about his relationship with the VTESS team, “I live far from Vientiane and I know that I need to adapt and improve my capacity to do well as an ESS coach. I also had to learn using online tools including online meetings to be able to work effectively with the VTESS team in Vientiane. Now, we regularly coordinate activities and exchange ideas and project progress online.”

VTESS is a project of the Government of Lao PDR and the Government of Switzerland through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Under the ESS component, early school leavers with disadvantaged background undergo a coaching process over several months integrating them into employment, self-employment or back into the education system. The project works in five provinces located across the country.

